

The Trumpeter (2001)

A Response To Chase's Accusation Of Tyranny



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Review Of:

In a Dark Wood: The Fight Over Forests and the Rising Tyranny of Ecology, Alston Chase. Houghton Mifflin, New York. 1995.

According to Alston Chase, a specter has been looming over America's social, cultural, and political scene: environmentalism. One should not be too surprised, especially coming from the author of *Playing God in Yellowstone*, but I am amazed to read that Chase, in his preface, announces that he is still an environmentalist! *In a Dark Wood* is not an environmentalist's book sensitive to the ecological issues of our times. Instead, it is a book attempting to be a scholarly treatise through an examination of the social, ecological, and scientific debates/struggles over the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest. Reading *In a Dark Wood* reminds me of my encounters with *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray, and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, books that are ideologically charged, and written with a rightist political agenda in mind i.e., to discredit affirmative action. However, in Chase's case, the agenda is to debunk what he sees as a growing cancer of value-laden environmentalism, despite his claims that he wishes to present all sides of the ecological struggle over the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Chase's way of evaluating truth and falsity (without resorting to right/wrong in a philosophical sense) in the struggle encompassing the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest is to invoke the principles of science or, in his case, *positivistic science*. For him, that is not any kind of scientific activity but "real" science that is supposed to be value-free, undertakes research, and presents substantive data to support its hypotheses. It is in this realm where for Chase, truth can be found which should guide our lives and our social, political and economic policies in relation to the ancient forests. Such a dated view of science is what philosophers of science have referred to as positivism, and it is surprising to find a trained philosopher like Chase to have not even considered the arguments about the dangers of positivism and scientism by social philosophers and philosophers of science, such as Karl Otto Apel and Jurgen Habermas. Even the later works of Wittgenstein have rejected this positivistic viewpoint.

If we follow the debate over positivism that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, Chase's conception of science is not the ultimate Truth nor arbiter as he claims. Social philosophers such as Jurgen Habermas have described such a position as scientism, i.e., the meaning of knowledge is defined by what the sciences do, and can thus be adequately explicated through the methodological analysis of scientific procedures. This blindness fosters objectivism, the belief in a world of self-subsistent facts whose law-like

connections can be grasped descriptively. Therefore, Chase's conception of science, despite his efforts at trying to show its objectivity (for us, objectivism), is just another world-view or in his case, scientific ideology, albeit couched within a restricted conception of science that draws its origins from the Vienna Circle. The social philosopher Jurgen Habermas has warned us about what this positivistic science and technology can do to modern societies. This type of knowledge has become the ideologies of modern and postmodern life, controlling and replacing other worldviews by debunking them for their lack of "scientific" rigor. Instead of showing an understanding and sensitivity to the philosophers' debates over positivism that occurred in the last 1960s and 1970s, Chase has unreflectingly adopted a positivist position in this book and used it as a sledgehammer to demolish any other scientific positions offered, such as ecosystem management and ecology, for example. Any study which does not meet Chase's positivistic criteria of science, then, is deemed non-science and ideological. For him, science cannot be value-laden nor teleological.

With the above rationale, Chase proceeds to examine the struggle over the ancient forests. The book is divided into four parts: Crisis: What is Nature; Discovery: Nature is an Ancient Forest; Response: The Biocentric Revolution; and Consequences: The Season of our Uncertainty. The book is written like a four-act play mixing historical accounts, philosophical and "scientific" explications, with dramatic dialogue. In fact, Chase has an opening prologue with a set of dramatic characters of ecologists, foresters, scientists, and loggers, etc. Even in this opening prologue Chase's bias shines through. Persons supporting the timber and lumber industry have glowing descriptions of their work/character, compared to those who are trying to save the ancient forests. Bill Devall "would become the apostle of deep ecology!" Jack Ward Thomas, the current Chief Forester of the United States Forest Service, who is not on either side of this struggle has this description: "He was just a good ol' boy from Texas, and had never laid eyes on a spotted owl until he was asked to head up a team to study the little troublemaker." (I supposed Ward's *faux pas* in Chase's judgment was that he led the FEMAT team that offered Option 9, which provided habitat protection to a certain extent for the northern spotted owl, as one of the options for the Clinton Administration to resolve the "timber logjam" over the cutting of the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Basically the book is about conflicting philosophies/worldviews: anthropocentrism and resourcism versus ecocentrism (Chase uses a dated terminology, biocentrism). Chase is attempting to fight a rearguard action to debunk the rising ecocentric conception of Nature by tracing the roots of environmentalism to show that the environmentalist's biocentric views of species relationships and natural processes cannot be considered science and should be considered philosophy, which for him has no place in our lives to guide policies, and for this matter, forest policy. To further drive through this point he even tries to assert that ecocentrism has totalitarian roots linked to Germany philosophy (via philosophers such as Martin Heidegger for example) that even the Nazis, including Hitler subscribed to; after all, according to Chase, Hitler and his immediate lieutenants were vegetarians! What I find disturbing is this attempt to over-reach (beyond acceptable logic) to make a point, a characteristic found throughout the book. I only wish that Chase had undertaken a constructive, and perhaps even a philosophical critique—besides a rather dated tepid attempt via the teleological argument—of ecocentrism. He has done neither.

On this basis, Part I (or Act 1) is biased through its various chapters. Instead of trying to come to grips with what is Nature, Chase writes about Nature and environmental movements with a jaundiced view reflecting little sensitivity or understanding of what ecocentrism is or what the environmentalists are saying about it. Instead, Nature is seen through anthropocentric/resourcism eyes and written about as such. Rachel Carson is accused of arousing fear among the American populace for her book, *Silent Spring*, whereas the logger is painted as the picture of almost mythical proportions of a Greek classic tragedy:

In the beginning loggers believed they were stewards of the earth who had found their Eden. Standing on the mountainside near Mod Creek in the Sweet Home district of Willamette National Forest in the spring of 1971, Tom Hirons watched the yarder, a machine that looked like a mammoth fishing rod, pull logs up the steep hillside to the loading dock.

“God,” Hirons thought, “I love this life.”

Thin, bespectacled, and only thirty-two, he was already his own boss. Just a week before, Hirons had formed the North Fork Logging Company, thus becoming a “gyppo logger”—an independent contractor who took logs from the forests, where cutters had felled them, to the mills, where they would be sawed into lumber. Now all he had to do was make a living for himself without getting his crew killed. Hirons stood in the sunlight inhaling the cool, damp air. The view was spectacular. Row upon row of forested mountains stretched to the horizon. Freedom and fresh air, Hirons thought. What more could a man want? (p. 13)

By contrast, if one is looking for drama over the struggle on the ancient forests, that is sober and heart wrenching, David Harris’ *The Last Stand* is trees and shoulders over *In a Dark Wood*.

Part 11 or Act II of Chase’s anti-environmentalist’s tragedy is an attempt to set up straw “persons”. In this section, the intent is to debunk the Endangered Species Act, and as well, to parrot the line that has been offered by the timber industry to question whether the northern spotted owl’s habitat is located only in old-growth forests. Besides this, Chase also targets the New Forestry scientists, for they according to his eyes, are part of the problem—with their research illuminating the vitality and ecological richness of the ancient forests under stress. Such findings further underscore the interconnectivity of life and the ecosystem management approach to forest management and practices which is anathema to Chase. Ecocentrism (biocentrism in Chase’s case) also comes under scrutiny in a strange attempt to link it with totalitarianism via intellectual sympathizers with Nazism such as Martin Heidegger through to Der Fuhrer:

Decrying man’s alienation from nature, many Nazi thinkers—among whom can be counted the philosopher Martin Heidegger—opposed what they saw as unnatural and decadent about modern living. . . . Likewise the Nazis blamed capitalists for driving farmers off the land and into towns in an effort to obtain cheap labor, thus undermining rural culture and promoting factory farms that used poisonous synthetic chemicals. Reestablishing the connection with nature, they believed, required crushing unnatural, non-German values. Private property had to be abolished, since it promoted commercialism, consumerism, and urbanization. Forests and wildlife, symbolizing Germany’s pre-Roman past, had to be preserved. . . . “SS training”. . . included a respect for animal life near Buddhist proportions. Meanwhile the Nazi regime embraced organic agriculture . . . including tests that featured feeding babies organically grown food. Himmler, who, like Hitler, was a vegetarian, created several organic farms, including one at Dachau which produced herbs for SS medicines. (pp. 124-5)

After throwing such a bomb, two paragraphs later Chase tries to downplay his attempts to connect environmentalism to totalitarianism. If the connection is dubious, then why spend four prior pages attempting to do it? In addition, Chase misunderstands what ecocentrism is all about. He interprets biocentrism (ecocentrism) as placing a higher value on ecosystems than on individuals or private property. This is not what ecocentrism means. *Ecocentrism recognizes the intrinsic values of all being, human beings are included in*

this.

Part III or Act III proceeds to recreate for us the forest drama that occurred over the ancient forests and the protection of the northern spotted owl. In this section, Chase shows us his propagandistic “finesse” by mixing subjects to achieve his anti-environmentalist goal. In the opening chapter, he discusses in vivid details the acts of Earth First! members in attempting to save the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest, followed with descriptions of membership and donation increases in national environmental groups in the same paragraph! He wants to project the image that it is radicalism gone wild, with massive numbers of Americans signing up to join in protest. One gets the impression that Americans have flooded to join radical environmental groups, which in fact is not the case. Chase has intentionally mixed the joining of the Wilderness Society, etc., by concerned Americans, with Earth First! memberships, primarily to raise a false alarm. R.C. Mitchell, et al., in a study of memberships in environmental movements has estimated that in 1990, Earth First! had approximately fifteen thousand members. If we consider the total membership of only national environmental lobbying organizations for 1990, their members total 3.1 million persons. These national bodies are hardly to be considered taking radical environmental stances, nor do they practice ecotage. This alarmist and simplistic approach towards understanding environmental movements clumps all these movements as being radical, instead of acknowledging and distinguishing their distinct missions and activities. It is reminiscent of former President Ronald Reagan seeking a communist under every palm tree outside the free world, when his administration proceeded to rearm America to counter the communist threat, which later turned out to be hollow as the events of 1989 have shown.

Part IV or Act IV attempts to relate the consequences of environmentalism for life in America. The chapters do not link in terms of issues. They continue the same themes of the previous three parts debunking groups, ideas and anything associated with the environmental movement. To Chase, civilizations and not Nature are fragile: “most societies do not die because they destroy their environment. Rather, the environment suffers when societies die (pp. 348).” John Perlin’s *Forest Journey* clearly suggests the opposite from this assertion. It is civilizations which collapse when they over exploit their ecology. Besides this, the human degradation of the forests is a historical process that started at least 5,000 years ago and has most always been exploitative. Where in the past, the degradation of the forests has been regional in scope, less intensive in nature, and perhaps, sometimes simultaneous in geo-spatial terms, the current exploitation is global in scope and intensive in nature (as a consequence of technological innovations). On this basis, and at this pace of degradation, the possibility of global ecological crisis is more likely than before. On a personal level, I mourn and bear witness to the trees that were sacrificed towards the printing of this 535 page book has not contributed to further understanding of our historically exploitative and degradative relationship with the forests.

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